

THE MODERN HEROINE IN FRENCH FICTION

LOUISE MAUNSELL FIELD

IF there are any traditions which have taken firm root in the Anglo-Saxon mind they are those which concern the untrammelled condition of French fiction and the intellectual brilliancy and extreme modernity of the French woman. For many years—even before the opening of the Victorian period—English authors have bewailed their own hampered state as compared with the liberty of their Gallic brethren. American writers joined in that plaint practically as soon as they began to exist at all, while memories of the many notable women whose personalities have affected the history, not merely of their own, but of other countries as well, mingle with recollections of George Sand and of newspaper articles regarding Mme. Curie to produce in the mind of the general reader a sort of take-it-for-granted impression that the Parisienne must be always well in the lead—must express the “dernier cri” in ideas as in gowns. Are not the very words feminine and feminist, as used in connection with what is known as the Woman Movement, of French origin? Surely, therefore, the twentieth century French novelist, inheritor from a long line of writers blessed with perfect liberty and devoted to the study of “la femme,” must provide the finest and truest examples of the modern heroine to be found in all literature, far excelling, of course, any which the unfortunate, prudery-shackled English or American author has ever been able to create.

Tradition and fact, however, are seldom if ever synonymous, and a search through a few dozen volumes of contemporary French fiction enforces the unexpected, perhaps reluctant conclusion that these recent novels are confined as to subject within surprisingly narrow limits, mastered and controlled by one practically all-pervading obsession—that of sex. It has often been said that Anglo-Saxon fiction was and is thrall to Edwin and Angelina: this was once in great part true, but those bonds are being rapidly broken—if indeed they have not already been thrown on the dust heap—and the released novelist is taking

all humanity and its every problem for his province, finding his realm circumscribed only by his own abilities and not by any extraneous command of "Thus far and no farther." Latter-day attempts to impose the old standards meet not merely with failure but with ridicule. The freedom which Balzac employed and demonstrated so superbly is his to use—if he can.

But the years which have seen the relegation of Edwin and Angelina to their proper and comparatively unimportant place have also witnessed the enthroning of Eugène and Delphine. If the progress of the former couple toward the point where, as the inimitable Mrs. Elton once expressed it, "Hymen's saffron robe might be put on" for their benefit, is no longer of supreme and unrivalled interest, the liaison of the latter occupies a position more prominent than ever, though it develops in much the same old way. Their appointments are now made over the telephone and they go to and fro in automobiles, that is all. With the alteration of a few phrases the average French novel of to-day might easily be accepted as having been written a quarter of a century and more ago; the change has been one of restriction, not expansion. Balzac swept over the whole possible territory, as it existed in his day; a dozen moderns combined are apparently unable to do the same for their own.

Nevertheless, a new kind of heroine has been added to the three types which were formerly the only ones to be found, broadly speaking, in French fiction. These three were, first, the betrayed but devoted wife, modelled more or less after the pattern of the Baroness Hulot; second, the married woman faithful to a single lover; third, the intrigante, faithful to no one. The intruder who now disputes the leading rôle with them has certain qualities in common with her who is known to English and American stories as the modern heroine: she is clever, well-educated, and self-supporting; she is nearly always suffragist and feminist—yet because of that sex-obsession, the differences are greater than the resemblances. The one is a human being all the time and a female part of the time; the other is a female all of the time, but a female of a species not entirely human. When a French author introduces a woman who, thanks to her own exertions, is economically independent, it is usually

with an air half of apology, half of bravado. Here, he tacitly declares, is a most extraordinary creature, a disagreeable phenomenon to be examined with attention and dismissed with rejoicing—an excrescence upon the body politic, not a natural healthy growth.

The three types of heroine who so long dominated and indeed still dominate the average French novel had one great interest and one only—"l'amour." They might and often did have a taste for art or music or poetry; such things were useful and pleasant adjuncts to the one great vocation, embellishing their lives in much the same way as various "elegant accomplishments" did those of Jane Austen's eminently proper, husband-awaiting young ladies. This new type, however, this strange and fearsome creature whose appearance in the world and rapid increase has compelled an attempt to reproduce her, even though it be inaccurately, in fiction, must necessarily have other, extrinsic interests. And it is amusing and rather pathetic to see in what a hesitating, handle-it-only-with-the-tongs manner these interests are usually treated: the sigh of relief with which the author returns to that side of his heroine's existence which is traditional and familiar to him, the side absorbed by "l'amour"—illicit, of course—is perfectly audible. For the French writer is seldom happy when he strays far from that field of sexual relations in which he has for centuries been at liberty to roam as he would, analyzing its every weed and flower with a freedom to which his Anglo-Saxon confrère has only recently attained with some trouble and a good deal of noise, a freedom which has resulted in some remarkable triumphs of skill and accuracy. It is in this erstwhile freedom which has imperceptibly evolved into a tacit compulsion that a reason may be found for one of the essential differences which separate the modern heroine of French fiction from her English or American sister; while the former frequently adopts or strives to adopt the man's standard of morality—the French novel-hero's, be it understood—the latter endeavors to induce the man to accept hers, not without success. And this is a difference which affects the mental attitude, not only of the heroine herself, but of all those surrounding her. Never for a moment is the "femme émancipée" a real comrade to her mas-

culine co-workers; always she is either victor or vanquished in the unceasing battle of sex. "Man and woman's friendship," says Leonard Merrick in *The Position of Peggy*, "is the one true and safe foundation for their love": it is upon this foundation that the one heroine often, though not always, builds; to the other it is nearly if not quite unknown. The clever, cynical Anna Pékarskine, an excellent example of this type, chooses as her "amant en titre" a stupid man, that she may not run any risk of imperilling her liberty by caring for him too much; an idea as representative in its way as the general expectation in the office where Marcelle Tinayre's "Rebelle" worked when Noël Delysle came so often to see her—expectation not of a wedding, though there was nothing to prevent that culmination, which in the end actually did take place, but of a liaison.

And yet this very "Rebelle" is one of the few sympathetically portrayed upper-class working-women in French fiction. A journalist, with in the beginning a querulous invalid husband as well as a child to support, she is provided with the excuse for working which seems to be absolutely necessary from the French novelist's point of view; that a heroine should pursue any occupation apart from those which he—or she!—loves to describe as the "charming ones of women"—shopping, dressing and visiting—is apparently a very distasteful pill for him to swallow. "Thou shalt be idle" is the command he wishes her to obey first, last, and all the time. Earning money is not, he thinks, conducive to elegance; work for work's sake, the desire for some worth-while employment, is incomprehensible. When old she may be permitted to devote herself to "bonnes œuvres," but only after the years or some exceptionally tragic loss have made "l'amour" forevermore impossible. Which for one of the thriftiest nation on earth, the nation of the "bonne bourgeoisie," in all things her husband's partner, seems rather out of character.

And then one suddenly finds oneself remembering the oft-repeated declarations of Frenchmen that the novels of their nation do not represent it truly, and beginning to ask a little shyly whether French fiction is not in fact as convention-ridden as Anglo-Saxon ever was, though by conventions of a very dif-

ferent kind. That liberty to describe in detail what the English or American writer was obliged entirely to avoid or indicate only by a series of asterisks, to give a minute and particularized account of certain emotional phases which to them were taboo, that liberty once so envied has developed into a coercion. An over-stimulated interest in one set of problems has crystallized fiction into the eternal triangle and its allied shapes, often beautifully clear, exquisite in color and perfect in form, but somewhat monotonous. Of course this crystallization is not and never has been complete; every now and then a writer frees himself, temporarily at least, from the prevailing sex-obsession and produces such a book as, for instance, *L'Incendie*; rules without exceptions are rare. Generally speaking, however, French fiction has concentrated upon the one subject until such concentration has become a convention as powerful in its way as that now obsolete one which obliged Thackeray to preface *Pendennis* with an apology which was also a protest.

But now comes the twentieth century woman to shatter this convention as she has already shattered so many, insisting upon her right to occupy herself, if she so pleases, with things other than "l'amour et la famille," demanding her place in fiction as in real life. Into the Anglo-Saxon novel she has come gracefully, as a natural development, and with her has at last arrived the beneficent, long-coveted liberty to discuss and analyze subjects once forbidden, which though at first productive of a good deal of wordy warfare is now fast becoming a matter of course. Will her advent signalize the emancipation of the French novel too from its conventions, add freshness, variety, a broader human as distinct from a sexual interest, to its already attained clarity of style and admirable form? Certainly she promises to be even more of an iconoclast in French than she has been in English and American novels, this forceful, very much alive and impossible to ignore "Modern Heroine."

JOHN H. TWACHTMAN

JOHN CURNOS

IF it were really possible for the soul of the dead to inhabit a new body, then we could say with some degree of assurance that the spirit of one of the painter-priests of Zen, the initiators of the Japanese Renaissance of the fifteenth century, had taken possession of John Twachtman, a painter who carried American landscape to the highest state of perfection that it has so far reached.

"In the art inspired by Zen thought," says Mr. Laurence Binyon, "*material is dissolved into idea* to an extreme that no other art in the world has reached. The typical Zen picture is a landscape; and before a typical Zen landscape one is scarcely conscious of the means employed by the artist; the idea of the artist's mind seems almost disembodied and immaterial, something eluding language."

This description of Zen art might be applied without exaggeration to a fine example of Twachtman's art. He conceived American landscape in the same lofty mood as the masters of the Kano School Japanese landscape, or as the painters of the Sung dynasty Chinese landscape. These last had attained, in the twelfth century, to such absolute synthetical beauty and spontaneity of impression that Mr. Binyon has declared their art to be "as modern as that of Corot or Whistler." There are things in which the ancients had forestalled modernity.

Twachtman is a thorough modern. He resembles, however, these Eastern artists in his contemplative attitude toward nature, in the almost ethereal character of his technique, in the purity and simplicity of his emotion, and in the imperceptible merging of his spirituality in its technical expression.

Twachtman has been called an Impressionist. The assertion needs considerable qualification. For it is curious that while the effects of color and of the vibration of light, based on the ideas of Chevreuil, are in evidence, the means whereby these are obtained are far from being apparent. We are not conscious for a single moment of science, of "broken color," of routine

Impressionism. We are aware only of the breath of life in the picture, of a mood imprisoned in a frame, of the exalted feeling which has prompted such sonorous expression.

Twachtman is kin to Whistler rather than to Monet. Both have delicacy, reserve, the selective faculty, the sensitive vision, the power of suggestion; both have a perfect if limited instrument, possessed of the nature of a violin, for the utterance of a poetic or musical mood; an instrument, clear and resonant, capable of evoking the equivalent of sound in color, of awakening evanescent tones which vibrate and die away and become lost in infinity. And finally, both make us think, however remotely, of the votaries of Zen.

Twachtman painted day as Whistler painted night. He saw nature as through a delicate gossamer. He peopled the air with his brooding thoughts and confided his spiritual experience to mists and snows and falling water. His soul loitered over the pools of autumn and the freshets of spring, and his eye conceived Niagara as a great poetic vision. We do not know that summer was among his seasons. The thaws of winter undoubtedly had a fascination for him. He always painted winter with great tenderness. He did not attempt to paint it as a harsh and wrathful visitant, but as a tranquil guest, who, as manifestation of the world's visible beauty, lent serenity to the soul. His house at Greenwich, Connecticut, often appears a dream among snows, his own humble Fuji Yama, not less sacred than the Japanese mountain, and sometimes seen through the naked branches of trees that appear outlined like glorious patterns of frost against the cold haze of rose and purple. Each detail in his best paintings makes a picture, each is a perception of infinity; and the whole picture might be a detail of a still larger picture. The scenes he has painted never end with the frame. When he shows a boat in a mist the whole thing might be a single quivering atom, no larger than a drop of water, which strives eagerly to join other affined atoms no less quivering and alive. He seldom employs a figure, but no artist has peopled his solitudes more worthily, or made the spectator more the companion of his reflections. A landscape by Twachtman, seen but once, comes back with all the poignant reality of a face seen

in a dream. One remembers a little picture of a morning in spring for its keen sense of freshness, for the tender, dewy quality of its grass, for the feeling of sappiness in the young slender birches; but above all for the mood of solitude, which the artist must have felt intensely: it permeates the scene as delicately as the breath of newly-awakened earth.

The process by which he expressed mood seems as effortless as it is elusive. Never does the artist betray the slightest suggestion of fatigue or of a loss in interest. Never, as one critic has said, does one find in his work an opaque shadow, a harsh edge, the pressure of a heavy hand. "Ethereal color and form seem to have been blown into the canvas." His art is a victory of the creator over his materials. The victory is two-fold. It must be borne in mind that the art of painting is externally the portrayal of concrete objects by concrete means. A painter's problem is to impart the abstract to the concrete; ideas, moods or musical sensations to visible forms. To put an extreme aspect on the matter, he must strive to make the visible invisible, and the invisible visible. It is like a problem in metaphysics. Paint is a concrete thing. A brush-stroke by itself signifies less than a word or a musical scale. Twachtman has spiritualized the objects he painted and at the same time he has spiritualized his paint. No reproduction can give even an inkling of the delicate quality of his art, which, at its best, is so subtle as to resist all efforts of the camera to reproduce it. Here is a description of one of his characteristic pictures, *Horseneck Falls, Winter*, by an American critic:

"... The snow, faintly blue, fringes the cold, motionless water, and lies sprinkled on the slopes, over the dead vegetation of which seems to hover the spent breath of its winter coloring in faintest suggestion of tawny yellow, rose, and violet. In the dry, white, misty atmosphere the slender tree-stems stand, as if silent and desolate. Fecundity is checked; Nature is inert; and the soul of Nature is still in the grip of winter. The whole scene is an emanation of Nature's spirit, interpreted through the spiritual emotion of the artist."

Had Monet painted the same scene he no doubt would have made us feel the power of his orchestration. But Twachtman

had captured the soul. Therein lies his superiority. A man's technique is his ego, and in Twachtman this ego is supreme not by its self-assertion, but by its self-abnegation. His technique, less "professional" than Monet's, makes itself imperceptible, loses itself in the soul of things, passes in its perfection into another state, a kind of artistic Nirvana, wherein the spirit becomes free of matter. Flaubert must have meant such a state when he said: "A perfect being would no longer be egotistical."

We know very little of Twachtman's life. He was born in Cincinnati in 1853. At the age of 26 he went to Munich, where he studied for two years under Laefftz. Afterwards he went to Venice with Duveneck. Later he studied at the Académie Julian in Paris under Boulanger and Lefebvre. He survived his influences. He died in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1902. He died "all too young—the inevitable consequence," we are told, "of his intense life, which must have consumed his nervous forces and drawn upon his emotional reserve with an extravagance that far exceeded nature's power to reconstruct."

SONNETS OF A PORTRAIT-PAINTER

A Sequence

ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

I

DEAR fellow-actor of this little stage,
We play the hackneyed parts right merrily,—
Trifle with words drawn from the poet's page,
And match our skill with cool and conscious eye.
All gracious gestures of each shining rôle
Have been the garments of our summer sport. . . .
But now, when ominous thunders shake my soul,
My reason gives of us no high report. . . .
I could not mimic Romeo had I lain
By Juliet's bier in bitter dizzy truth.
Henceforth my mouthings, choked, inept, and vain,
Will lack the light touch fitting amorous youth.
Let fall the mask! Let end the tinselled play!
Ghastly the footlights front this sudden day.

II

It needs no maxims drawn from Socrates
To tell me this is madness in my blood.
Nor does what wisdom I have learned from these
Serve to abate my most unreasoned mood.
What would I of you? What gift could you bring,
That to await you in the common street
Sets all my secret ecstasy a-wing
Into wild regions of sublime retreat?
And if you come, you will speak common words,
Smiling as quite ten thousand others smile—
And I, poor fool, shall thrill with ghostly chords,
And with a dream my sober sense beguile.
And yet, being mad, I am not mad alone:
Alight you come! . . . That folly dwarfs my own.